

## Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION NODS-00

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AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 1077

NODIS

JERUSALEM FOR SECRETARY'S PARTY

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PFOR, SY, IS, LE, US  
SUBJECT: SHIHABI COMMENTS ABOUT NABATIYAH WITHDRAWAL

1. SUMMARY: COS CHIHABI SAYS SYRIA "DISAPPOINTED" IN USG HANDLING OF ISRAEL OVER NABATIYAH WITHDRAWAL. END SUMMARY.
2. AFTER COMPLETED DISCUSSION FEBRUARY 15 OF SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR SECRETARY'S VISIT TO BEIRUT, SHIHABI SAID HE WANTED ME TO KNOW SYRIA HAD BEEN "DISAPPOINTED" IN WAY USG HANDLED ISRAEL CONCERNING SYRIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN SOUTH LEBANON. (COMMENT: SHIHABI UNLIKE KHADDAM SELDOM USES THE TERM "ARAB SECURITY FORCES" IN DISCUSSING SYRIAN MILITARY IN LEBANON.) SHIHABI SAID USG KNEW FROM THE BEGINNING THE MISSION OF THE SYRIAN ARMY IN LEBANON AND THAT WE SHOULD HAVE FACED DOWN ISRAELI OBJECTIONS CONCERNING SYRIAN UNITS IN NABATIYAH. I ASKED IF HE WAS CERTAIN THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO ISRAELI MILITARY COUNTERACTION HAD SYRIAN FORCES REMAINED IN THE NABATIYAH AREA. HE REPLIED HE WAS CONVINCED THAT ISRAELIS HAD BEEN BLUFFING THROUGHOUT. HE WAS AWARE THAT THEY HAD ALERTED THEIR FORCES ALONG THE LEBANESE BORDER

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AND THAT THE IDF HAD CANCELLED A MILITARY EXERCISE TO SEND FURTHER TROOPS NORTHWARDS. HOWEVER, HE DID NOT BELIEVE THEY WOULD HAVE MOVED ACROSS THE BORDER. HE RULED OUT EVEN A SURGICAL AIR STRIKE AGAINST THE SYRIAN TANKS AND TROOP LOCATIONS IN THE NABATIYAH AREA.

3. SHIHABI CONTINUED THAT HE UNDERSTOOD WE HAD URGED THE

WITHDRAWAL OF SYRIAN FORCES NORTHWARDS SO AS NOT TO INTERFERE WITH THE SECRETARY'S TRIP TO THE AREA, BUT WE SHOULD KNOW OUR VIRTUAL ESPOUSAL OF THE ISRAELI POSITION HAD LEFT A BAD TASTE IN DAMASCUS.

4. ON PERSONAL BASIS, I OBSERVED THAT:

(A) THE SYRIAN MOVE SOUTHWARDS FROM JEZZINE KAHR HUNA HAD BEEN DONE WITHOUT ANY COORDINATION, OTHER THAN PRESUMABLY WITH THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES. IT HAD TAKEN THE ISRAELIS BY SURPRISE AND ALARMED THEM AS SETTING A PRECEDENT.

(B) HAD EITHER SYRIA OR LEBANON SEEN FIT TO CONFIDE IN US, WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PREPARE THE ISRAELIS FOR THIS MOVEMENT. HOWEVER, EVIDENCE STRONGLY SUGGESTED THAT IT STILL WOULD HAVE BEEN UNACCEPTABLE TO THE GOI. SYRIA HAS APPARENTLY HIT THE "RED LINE."

(C) WE WERE PERHAPS NOT AS CERTAIN AS SYRIA THAT THE ISRAELIS WOULD HAVE AVOIDED SOME TYPE OF MILITARY COUNTER-ACTION. THIS COULD HAVE DERAILED THE SECRETARY'S VISIT WITH ALL THAT IT REPRESENTS AS OUR EFFORT TO RELAUNCH THE PEACE PROCESS.

5. ASKED WHAT FORCES HAD REPLACED THE SYRIAN ASF ELEMENTS IN THE NABATIYAH AREA, SHIHABI SAID THAT NO MILITARY UNITS HAD GONE IN. BEIRUT HAD SENT ADDITIONAL GENDARMARIE BUT THESE COULD NOT CONTROL MOVEMENT OF FEDAYEEN, MUCH LESS SEIZE THEIR ARMS.

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6. SHIHABI CONCLUDED WITH OBSERVATION THAT IF, AGAINST HIS ESTIMATE, THE ISRAELIS MOVED MILITARILY, IT JUST MIGHT HAVE WORKED OUT IN EVERYONE'S BEST INTEREST BY PUBLICLY CLARIFYING ISRAELI OPPOSITION TO ANY, WHAT HE TERMED, "CONSTRUCTIVE STEPS" TOWARDS REESTABLISHING PEACE AND SECURITY IN LEBANON AND, BEYOND THAT, TOWARDS A GENERAL PEACE SETTLEMENT.

7. I ASKED SHIHABI HOW SCENARIO FOR WEAPONS COLLECTION WAS PROCEEDING IN LEBANON. HE REPLIED IT WAS GOING SATISFACTORILY AND REITERATED HIS FAMILIAR POSITION THAT ALL FACTIONS WOULD BE COMPELLED TO SURRENDER THEIR WEAPONS. HE EXPRESSED SOME IMPATIENCE THAT SARKIS WAS STILL NOT MOVING TO RECONSTITUTE THE LEBANESE ARMY. HE DESCRIBED SARKIS AS THE ONLY REAL "STRONG MAN" IN LEBANON TODAY AND ASSERTED SARKIS IS CAPABLE OF FACING DOWN ALL HIS CRITICS. (SHIHABI MENTIONED CHAMOUN AND GENERAL HANNA SAID IN THIS CONNECTION.) WITH THE BACKING SARKIS ENJOYS WITHIN LEBANON FROM SYRIA AND THE REST OF THE ARAB WORLD, HE CAN AND MUST

MOVE OUT NOW TO RECONSTITUTE THE LEBANESE ARMY. THIS WAS ONE OF SYRIA'S BASIC INTERESTS, SHIHABI ADDED, BECAUSE IT WANTED TO WITHDRAW ITS ARMY FROM LEBANON AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

8. COMMENT: WE CAN TAKE FOR GRANTED THAT SHIHABI'S COMMENTS ON THIS SUBJECT REFLECT ASAD'S OWN VIEWS. WHETHER ASAD RAISES IT HIMSELF OR NOT, THIS EPISODE HAS CREATED IN THE MINDS OF THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP AT LEAST A SMALL CLOUD OVER THE SECRETARY'S FORTHCOMING MEETING HERE IN DAMASCUS.

9. SUGGEST DEPT PASS AMMAN, CAIRO AND JIDDA.  
MURPHY

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## Message Attributes

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